

CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

ONE OF THE FOUR CARNEGIE MUSEUMS OF PITTSBURGH

Independent Filmmaker, Anthony McCall, Lecture

Date of Recording: September 09, 1975

Location: Carnegie Museum of Art

Running Time: 31 minutes

Format: 1/4-inch audiotape

Date of Transcript: November 2015

Department of Film and Video archive

Lectures and interviews with artists

ID: fv001/002/049

Bill Judson: Right. Okay. Now we got to test, we got to test. We got lots of power. We got all kinds of volume. Here's your volume here. No, that's okay. It doesn't matter, because there's no mic ...

Bill Judson: Now that we have our eyes accustomed once again to ordinary light, I'm sure that Anthony would be more than willing to respond to any number of questions for just an extraordinary set of films. [pause 00:01:30-00:02:06]

Anthony McCall: Does anybody want-Speak up.

Sally Dixon: We just want to look at you.

Anthony McCall: Oh.

Robert Haller: Okay, Peter Kubelka says that the ultimate film is a projector without any film in it. Do you feel you're approaching the ultimate or are you past that?

Anthony McCall: I'm glad you asked me that question. Yes.

Audience: I noticed tonight there's a lot of people here- I only noticed, actually, the whole time one person, actually their walk through the beam. [movement of the microphone 00:02:49] We talked about this the other day. The whole concept implies an object, and at the same time, of course, it's obviously not an object. Have you arrived at any ideas that would help us- [both talk at the same time 00:03:09]

Anthony McCall: - people have a great deal of respect for that form. They allow it to be [inaudible 00:03:17]. It's a very tentative kind of [inaudible 00:03:21]. At one of the showings in New York, it was really monumental. It was about 110 feet long. [inaudible 00:03:32] of the cone was about 15. Some people walked all the way up to the projector, around the back of the projector and down the other side. That happened quite a lot. Some people went through. That has a lot to do with why this film can be quite dramatic at times, because by giving it the right to be solid it becomes dramatic and frightening; it's pushing you around in relation to the wall, which you know is solid, and you kind of somehow give the light that same quality.

Sally Dixon: Do you prefer to have people not walk through that cone? I always thought there was the understood invitation to go play in it, to interrupt it in different ways.

Anthony McCall: I don't really mind what people do, as long as it doesn't destroy the thing as it's intended to be for other people. Sometimes people are right very high up on the beam and start to do things high up and it can eradicate things [inaudible 00:04:41] rather further on. I really don't mind doing that. I've

found so far an awful lot of respect for the thing. It doesn't seem to be a problem.

Sally Dixon: I have another question about your intentions, and that is that when I saw it in Belgium it was in a regular formal theater situation, and the projector was brought down on the main floor and there were regular seats fixed to the floor. There was a center aisle, so the beam went all the way down the very long center aisle. Then there was a stage raised, and the screen was above that. People could never get up in front of that circle that was being gradually described. Yet, being on ground level at the source, you can still play with the beam and blow smoke and jump up and reach in and cast shadows, but nothing ever interrupted watching that circle gradually close, and the drama of the moment of closure I missed tonight completely. [00:05:46]

I just wandered-I had assumed that the Belgium experience was it, until tonight. I'm just wondering now if that was the unique experience. What is your feeling, then, about the image on the screen versus the solid beam of light itself? Is one more important for you than the other?

Anthony McCall: I've always thought of the wall as really nearly being the place [inaudible 00:06:12]. I've never really thought [inaudible 00:06:16] being anything more than a kind of diagram [inaudible 00:06:18].

Sally Dixon: That's interesting.

Anthony McCall: [inaudible 00:06:24] That was the only possible way to do it, and I understand that [inaudible 00:06:32]-

Sally Dixon: [inaudible 00:06:41] ... very gradual slowing down [inaudible 00:06:45].

Anthony McCall: If anything, I think [inaudible 00:06:48] ... than if it had been shown in a room, a little room on the side, where there would have been that ...

Sally Dixon: Very dramatic.

Anthony McCall: I rather like the idea of people having clamber over the seats. They stumble over things that are supposed to be there for their benefit, and they're suddenly stumbling blocks. I think that's rather nice.

Sally Dixon: It was like a tennis match at the end, because people sort of stood on either side flanking this beam with their heads swiveling from the projector to the screen. No one wanted to miss the moment, the actual moment.

Anthony McCall: It's the best possible way to treat regimented seats: jump on them.

Audience: I found when I was watching I forgot completely about the screen, and then I looked at the screen.

Anthony McCall: It's really a sort of [inaudible 00:07:43].

Sally Dixon: But certainly [inaudible 00:07:45]. They were equal, equally strong, and the drama, the whole thing about duration in time there was very exciting.

Anthony McCall: I've never seen it that way. I guess I'll have to try it.

Audience: How did you make these images in terms of generating a line for the camera?

Anthony McCall: They're made in very simple ways, nothing particularly complicated. This one is just a white line drawn with a ruling pen, with white paint on a black paper, and it's filmed under an animation camera, which is only used because it's the most steady kind of camera, rock steady, and because there's calibrations on it which makes it possible to move it minutely, bit by bit, because it's shot frame by frame. I might move it like a 50th of an inch, and then shoot five frames, and then move it another 50th of an inch. That's rather hard to do. On an animation camera you've got degree calibrations with turns of a handle [inaudible 00:08:53]. It's very simple and very straightforward. There's no editing. It's entirely preconceived and once it's shot, in both cases.

Audience: Have you ever projected your films out of doors?

Anthony McCall: Yes, yes.

Audience: What happens? Does the light just - [inaudible 00:09:16]?

Anthony McCall: The way I've done it is I put the projector on the ground, because at night time there's more vapor in the air, so you can see smoke-particles in water, and have it on the ground so that the lower part of the beam runs parallel to the grass like a foot in the ground, and then the upper part just keeps increasing. It's wonderful. You can walk 400-500 yards along the beam. Where there are planes of light, they seem to slice through the trees. It's very dramatic and very, very different from showing them inside. I don't think this one can really be shown outdoors because it's very much to do with a vertical and horizontal plane in opposition to the moving one, but certainly all the conical films can be shown outdoors. [00:10:06]

Audience: Sally said that it would be interesting to see this last film in more of a theater setting. What do you think of that? I agree. It would be interesting to see, to concentrate on it in a seat, without the disturbance.

Anthony McCall: This last one?

Audience: Without the social, as much of the social, which I adore. I hate to give it up ever.

Anthony McCall: I can't really see it working terribly well, because I think it's an awful lot to do with the physicality of this and this.

Sally Dixon: I wasn't meaning to do away with the walls. I was meaning the people standing around interrupting it somehow didn't seem to work for me as well. I wanted to concentrate on what was happening.

Anthony McCall: The structure in this film is slightly different from the way we've looked at it tonight. We've seen all four cycles that exist, all four parts of one cycle that exists. Actually, we've seen it in its minimum length. In fact, it should go on for a number of hours, even all day. People come and go in their own time. You would tend to come on your own or with other people. You might enter a room in which there's no one else there. I agree. I like it when it's very pure like that. *Line Describing a Cone* somehow works very well with crowds of people, but I agree. It shouldn't really be seen by an audience, and by giving it infinite duration you no longer have that social phenomena called an audience. You have just individuals coming and going. That's its proper condition.

Audience: We said the minimum. Could you give me one other cycle, just one other cycle?

Anthony McCall: This film?

Audience: Yeah.

Anthony McCall: Oh, yes. You've seen the whole thing. It just re-cycles. What happened is that there's one 15 minute reel of film, which, first of all, it was played head to tail, and it was taken off the back and run tail to head, then it was taken off the back again, put on the front with the reel reversed, so it played head to tail, back to front. Then it was taken off the back, put on the front, and it was played tail to head, back to front.

Audience: There's a circular thing.

Anthony McCall: Then it stops. You just take it off the back, and you're back to head to tail. It just keeps recycling. There's no natural end, just [inaudible 00:12:42].

Audience: Have you ever seen it in a situation going on and on?

Anthony McCall: Yeah.

Audience: You have?

Anthony McCall: When I was in London in April. It was done at the Serpentine Gallery. We only did it for four hours, but it was sufficient. There were never more than five or six people there at a time, but somehow 50 or 60 people saw it. I don't know how it happened, because it always seemed so-Yes, we did it for four hours. That was, what, three cycles, a little bit more than three cycles.

Audience: Have you ever run it- instead of keeping [inaudible 00:13:17] head to tail [inaudible 00:13:20] backwards [inaudible 00:13:22] ... tried something like that, that generated a line?

Anthony McCall: Yes, you can do it in different orders, sure. You can do it accidentally. Yes, it really is of no consequence which order it is either, providing that one follows a certain logical sequence of altering the-

Audience: Do you have any ideas on what you might do with this concept at this point?

Anthony McCall: It's a good question.

Audience: The possibilities are endless.

Audience: I didn't hear. What was the question?

Anthony McCall: What's the next step, is the question. I can't really answer it directly, but I'd say that I'm not particularly interested in pursuing a sort of exploration of the possible light geometries. I'm more interested in continuing to do things to the film. Or maybe it's not film; neither am I particularly in love with the medium as such. I'm more interested in changing things that alter how one can see a work. *Line Describing a Cone* did one kind of alteration to film, to seeing film. Then I went on and I made a very long film called *Long Film with Four Projectors*, a six hour film, where I first tried the idea of stretching the duration, and that's isolating people, so that the whole idea of the audience was altered. That was continued with this. Although, I was interested in film when I was in that quality the projector has of taking- [whatever you give it. I don't really know. I'm thinking that the next film probably won't involve light at all. That's all very tentative. [00:15:22]

Audience: It sounds like an Agatha Christie mystery.

Robert Haller: You made films before *Line Describing a Cone*. What were they like? All we have is titles.

Anthony McCall: I didn't make very many films before. I made about six I guess, and they were all pretty short. The longest of those was *Landscape with Fire*, which I generally list and I [inaudible 00:15:52] on the list, which is a seven minute documentary of color [inaudible 00:15:55], of one of my earlier performances,

which involves fires in landscape. It was just an ordinary kind of documentary with a few Brakhage type image inversions. It was fairly conventional.

I came to this not so much thinking about film, but rather thinking about -well, two things. One were the performances that I was doing were involved in dividing up time very much. It was really just about temporality and the way one could divide it up by using units of duration, in this case, how long gasoline burned for. It was very carefully scored and measured and very exact overlapping durations in a landscape. The other thing I was doing-I was thinking about sculpture and how one could completely occupy space without having any physical stuff, things that weighed a lot and things that couldn't be sent through the post. I can't quite say why I was interested.

At any rate, what I was working with before I worked with light was solid sound, what I call solid sound. I was just moving masses of sound [inaudible 00:17:22]. I was moving masses of sound around a big space, using [inaudible 00:17:25]. The space was totally occupied and activated, but without any physical stuff. It was left out. The idea for the films came out of those two concerns: one with time and the other with occupying space.

Robert Haller: In the film that was shown in the corner, the straight line during the strobing seemed to move back and forth. Is that an optical illusion?

Anthony McCall: I think it's partly that. It may also be-a projector tends to [inaudible 00:18:00]

Robert Haller: How come you strobed it?

Anthony McCall: I strobed it?

Robert Haller: You did from the cone. The cone is [inaudible 00:18:13].

Anthony McCall: Right. Oh, you're referring to the shimmer.

Robert Haller: Yeah.

Anthony McCall: Yeah.

Audience: The alternate-

Anthony McCall: Alternative frames, blank frame for every-I just wanted to see what it would look like.

Robert Haller: Did you try it without, and then make the decision [both talking at the same time 00:18:29]-

Anthony McCall: *Light Describing a Cone* was solid, like an image every frame. There was a film came between this two which is called *Partial Cone*, which was a fifteen minute film, and it just had a static-You know how the cone is –light goes halfway through the film? It was that right way through the film. I just modulated the light at different frequency. It went from the solid through a series of shimmers in very exact stages. There was a at which the glimmer began to flicker, and there was a point at which the flicker began to blink, and a point at which you just saw it as going on and off. I went through an entire set of scales.

Robert Haller: What film?

Anthony McCall: *Partial Cone*. I guess I selected one of those points for this film.

Audience: You talked about the cone occupying space as if it were a sculpture. I had a different impression. I had the idea that the cone is defining space and that it could have been in a bigger space; it could have been a spatial experience itself, almost architectural. Like this thing you did here, I was thinking that if you took four projectors, one in each corner of the room, and really did alter the space we were in, I think that would be a pretty interesting spatial experience.

Anthony McCall: That's what *Long Film with Four Projectors* does. It has four projectors positioned more or less in corners, with the beams all coming in and intersecting. In that case, wherever you are in the space, you can't avoid seeing at least two beams. With all the conical films and with this film, it still has that single axis. You have to be in certain positions relative to the beams seen. Whereas, *Long Film with Four Projectors*, wherever you look you can't help but be in a field which is created by these intersecting beams of light.
[00:20:36]

Audience: Were you surprised by the spatial experience when you tried to plan what it was going to be like?

Anthony McCall: I'm always interested-sorted of delighted by [inaudible 00:20:51]. I usually imagine them pretty much how they are before, since they're always completely preconceived and then made, and then I see them for the first time the same time as other people do. There's no room for-I'm usually pretty sure about what I'm going to get before.

Audience: I was more struck with the space, because I'm an architect, and I was impressed with the spatial experience right away. I was wondering how sensitive you were to the spatial experience, whether you were more concerned with the light, because of your filmmaking background.

Anthony McCall: Each one shifts. This one is very architectural, architecture as representing our two basic modes as standing and lying. The film goes

between those two and treats them as a scale. When you're watching, sometimes you'll press against the wall and other times you're lying on the ground. Yes. I always think of architecture as- those sort of sensations as being prior to architecture. I would say the film and architecture [inaudible 00:22:05]- rather than the film having architectural ramifications.

Audience: You said you're an architect, and you saw the film in terms of space. I'm a teacher, and I saw the film in terms of interactions. I'm wondering what other types of perceptions you perceived on the film.

Anthony McCall: I'm certainly most interested in the social differences that can occur through the medium of the work. I think of relation with the sculpture and architectural things as being somehow coming way after that. It's a rather hard question to answer. Maybe you should ask somebody else. Is there anyone that isn't a teacher or an architect?

Audience: There's a tract or a speech by Brakhage about light from the projector, which probably would be interesting to you. I haven't read it. I'm looking for it.

Anthony McCall: Is it published?

Audience: I don't think so. I think he just got up to talk before the film.

Anthony McCall: Recently?

Audience: [inaudible 00:23:45] ... projector. I don't know. Do you know? No?

Sally Dixon: I can't remember what it was or whether he was quoting something he'd written or said. Does anybody else remember?

Audience: Anthony, have you thought about putting together your sound and your use of the sound in space and the films as a kind of a choreographed occupation of that space?

Anthony McCall: Those sound pieces exist as [inaudible 00:24:29] and they've never been shown. There was a situation for which they were made in London once, which didn't materialize after I'd made them. They've never actually been shown. I think the new film that I'm thinking about at the moment might involve some of those ideas. Once again, I'm not terribly interested in activating the space idea at the moment. It's very hard to put into words. If I can claim that *Line Describing a Cone* and some of these films are close to something very, very fundamental in terms of a certain aspect of film, which is projected light-In the next film I want to get very close in a similar way perhaps to temporality in a very abstract way, and I don't know how to do that. That's what I'm thinking about, and I think that it might very well involve sound, and might very well not involve light. That's all I can say about it now. [00:25:45]

Audience: What types of performances had you done before you started making film?

Anthony McCall: A "performance" is rather a misleading word, I guess. They were more like very carefully planned sequences of actions, which involved things like timing, very careful timing and going through a series of tasks which had been pre-planned, which involved measuring gasoline lighting and these things, of spatially situating in various degrees. Once again, the relationship with the audience was very neutral. If people wanted to come and witness it, that was fine. It certainly wasn't a performance in the sense of doing something for an audience. It was more an activity which could be witnessed. They had varying lengths. The longest one I did was last June in the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. That was a thirteen and a half hour thing which began at dawn and finished at dusk.

Once again, I had the idea there that the work, rather than being an object-I think the performance is an object. It has a finite duration of half an hour, an hour, and it's an object which an audience can possess simply by seeing it all. The length of the piece was intended to make the work more like the condition of the space. When you arrived it had already been going on, and when you left it would be still going. It was rather how you were describing your life, that sense of it being kind of eternal, whereas you came and went, which is a very nice contradiction for temporal work, to kind of reverse that normal feeling.

Audience: Anthony, I was wondering, in your concepts of solid light films, I can understand the film part in the last film, *Four Projecting Movements*, and especially when you have pulsated movements of light in your partial cone, but in *Line Describing a Cone*, I keep on wondering what the difference in terms of a light sculpture, if you had two plates of metal, one with the circle drawn and the other with a mechanical clock revealing it. The difference between something like that being shown as opposed to a film with a pulsating light or alternate frames-

Anthony McCall: It's an interesting question. You're saying like it could be done some other way.

Audience: Right.

Anthony McCall: Yeah, I've thought about that, but I've decided that there's no point in- Film exists as a cultural artifact already, and it means things to people. It has a cultural value to everybody. Everyone goes to movies and has ever since they were kids. By using something which is so common-

Audience: I see.

Anthony McCall: - which people don't think twice about, by using that, rather than something which doesn't exist in the first place, you're actually manipulating social symbols.

Audience: The issue is the film, as opposed to what is the object of-

Anthony McCall: Yeah. One mustn't overlook the fact, I don't think, that one's manipulating social values. Film is an invisible medium in the sense that it's part of our landscape, our cultural landscape. Once you start prodding that, then people do think twice about it. I think that's why it's more interesting at the moment to work with things like film than it is painting or something of that kind, which has less and less cultural value in terms of most people's experience.

Audience: If there's nothing else, Anthony, I can't thank you enough for-

Anthony McCall: Thank you.

Audience: It's been our pleasure. Thank you. [end of discussion 00:30:05]

CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

ONE OF THE FOUR CARNEGIE MUSEUMS OF PITTSBURGH

Copyright © Creator, by permission. All rights reserved.

CMOA respects the intellectual property rights of artists and others. The CMOA website and all images and text contained therein are protected by applicable U.S. and international laws and regulations, and are owned by CMOA or used by CMOA with permission from the owners or under fair use or where otherwise specified. Copyright for some items are held by the artists and/or other third parties. You agree not to download, copy, reproduce, publish or transmit, or otherwise use any portion of the CMOA website (including any images or text contained therein), except for your own personal noncommercial use or “fair use,” as this term is defined by applicable copyright laws, without written permission from CMOA and/or other appropriate rights holders.

Commercial Use Is Restricted

Unauthorized publication or exploitation of museum files is specifically prohibited. Anyone wishing to use any of these files or images for commercial use, publication, or any purpose other than fair use as defined by law must request and receive prior permission from the appropriate rights holder(s). CMOA reviews all requests on a case-by-case basis and may require payment of a license fee depending upon the intended nature of such use.

For additional information, see the Carnegie Museum of Art Terms of Use.